

Foreword

This report summarizes the activities of the Open University of Israel (OUI) for the academic year 2011-12. This was the first year of the multiyear plan, which was designed to help the OUI address a variety of internal and external challenges in a changing environment. At the same time, and no less significantly, it was also the first year that the collective agreements for junior faculty and administrative staff were fully implemented. This has been an issue preoccupying the entire institution in recent years, ultimately resulting in an important change in the organizational life of the OUI.

In order to understand the external challenges facing us, the table below provides data illustrating the higher education system in Israel. According to information from the Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC), in the period from 1990 to 2005 the number of institutions of higher education almost tripled, with overall numbers of students likewise growing by a similar amount.

Institutes of Higher Education in Israel

Institutes with PBC Budgeting		1990	2005	2012
Universities	Research	7	7	7
	OUI	1	1	1
Colleges	General	0	6	12
	Art & Design	2	2	2
	Engineering	2	8	7
Private institutions				
	Academic colleges	2	7	15
Institutions with Ministry of Education funding				
	Teacher training colleges	7	26	23
TOTAL		21	57	67

In contrast, during the past seven years, although ten new colleges were added to the system, of which eight are non-budgeted (private) institutions, the number of students per intake barely rose, with the biggest increase during that period being graduate students. Nineteen percent of the country's 230,000 undergraduate students studied in the past year at the OUI (with 29% at other universities* and 52% at 58 colleges). This presents the Open University with an intriguing challenge.

* The Weizmann Institute does not offer undergraduate studies



In previous years a large proportion of students who chose the OUI did so because of the opportunity to combine study and work, and to embark on the study of any subject in the location of their choice. In 2012 those features are no longer unique to the OUI. Today, Israel has a large selection of colleges, including many in peripheral regions, receiving preferential funding for recently discharged soldiers wishing to study. These colleges in general, and private ones in particular, allow virtually any potential student to enroll for studies, and applicants with no *Bagrut* (matriculation certificate) or psychometric exam are offered preparatory courses. Most important, almost all colleges today offer the option of combining work and study through concentrated study programs and late-afternoon and Friday classes.

This means that the OUI now finds itself in competition with other institutions offering features which were previously its unique domain. The multi-year plan proposes ways of coping with this new situation from three different angles:

1. Improving the OUI "product": OUI courses have a reputation for being of an academically high level, but in the world of higher education the "product" is the academic degree itself. Although the OUI has always offered options for academic degrees in many fields, the system has not necessarily focused on encouraging students – even those who have successfully completed a considerable number of courses – to complete their degrees. While the dropout rate from colleges in general, and private colleges in particular, has been much lower, the general perception that it is difficult to complete a degree at the Open University has not added to its appeal. In order to address this specific problem, the OUI opened a new unit this year under the auspices of the

Dean of Academic Studies, with the purpose of **encouraging student retention towards completing a degree**. The new unit aims at achieving a higher graduation rate by providing a holistic approach to each student's academic program rather than merely managing individual courses. Enhanced services to students include expanding the "teaching toolbox," improving response and feedback by upgrading online support systems, and establishing a call center for potential applicants. All of these changes will certainly go far towards improving the OUI "product" in Israel's higher education world.

2. Attracting new populations: The fact that, in recent years, numbers of new students have been almost at a standstill, coupled with the larger number of institutions of higher education, necessitates a shift towards new potential target populations. Taking into account the multi-year plan, we decided to pay special attention to the Israeli Arab population. There were two primary reasons for this decision: (a) numbers of Arabic speakers pursuing higher education in Israel are relatively low, indicating a significant potential for growth and (b) the OUI benefits from certain facilities that place it in a relatively advantageous position for Arabic speakers – in particular, the option of offering student support from Arabic-speaking tutors. Our specially-developed program, "Soft Landing," is scheduled to be launched in 2012-13 and includes a pilot with special PBC funding. The program will offer an alternative syllabus to pre-academic courses to include OUI courses, with an option of transferring to other universities through transfer channels (the "Bridges" program).

3. Development of unique features: The same changes that brought about a decline in the OUI's exclusive character also motivated us to seek out new areas that can benefit from that very nature. In the past year, we arranged extra study support for Israelis who reside abroad – a feature unique to the OUI – and appointed a globalization coordinator tasked with handling that subject via the President's Office. We were also partners in a nationwide project of "Academia in High School," a collaborative venture with the Ministry of Education, the Prime Minister's Office and the PBC. Through this program, hundreds of high school students will be able to take academic courses at OUI beginning in the 2012-13 academic year.

I believe that all these steps will contribute to our success and prosperity as a university in this time of change,

and I commit to continuing this course of revitalization, embracing whatever adaptations may be needed with the help of our outstanding and loyal staff.

In addition to the many internal changes, the past year also saw a significant change in regulatory recognition for the OUI. Alongside our mission as an "everyperson's" university and an institution of excellence, the responsibility to contribute to national achievement has likewise always been in the forefront. For the first time last year this was expressed in our budgeting model. Whereas the PBC allocates budgets to public colleges on the basis of study output and to universities for study and research results as well, this year a special budget model was approved specifically for the Open University. In addition to budgeting for teaching parameters, the model contains a singular feature classified as "incentives," whereby the OUI is allocated a budget for research (as are other universities), development of study materials, and "special populations." This year's priority populations, as defined by the PBC, included the Arab and ultra-Orthodox sectors, and residents of peripheral regions. With this new model, the State, in the form of the PBC, recognized the OUI's unique role in the higher education system, both as a source of top-quality study material used by the entire higher education system, and as a means of making academic studies accessible to special populations. This special budgeting model means that the investment of recent years in research activity by faculty members, academic development achievements throughout the OUI's years of operation, and the dedicated handling of all students – in particular special student populations – will for the first time yield results in terms of the OUI's direct income.

This has been a year of challenges, change, and growth. It is our heartfelt wish that we be able to sustain these improvements in the coming year, together with our employees, members of the OUI authorities – the Council, the Executive Committee and the Senate; students, graduates and our thousands of friends and supporters in Israel and around the world.

I would like to extend special thanks to my colleagues, Prof. Judith Gal-Ezer, who has completed her third term as Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and to Prof. Sonia Roccas, who has completed her term as Dean of Academic Studies.

With warm wishes to all,


Hagit Messer-Yaron